DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 682 CS 214 755

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TITLE A Conflicting View in the Use of Journals for Composition and Literature Classes: Structure versus Freedom.
PUB DATE May 94
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Community College General Education Association (13th, Albany, NY, May 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Imagination; *Journal Writing; *Self Expression; *Student Journals; Student Needs; Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Writing Development

ABSTRACT

The most powerful and profound thoughts known to humankind are the result of freedom to write whatever it is that the soul must purge; whatever a person is thinking that troubles him or her; anything that hinders his or her ability to be in that particular moment of living. On the first day of class, one writing instructor tells her students that she wants them to give her "guts and glory." And no sooner are these words our of her mouth than she explains that there are ways of conveying their emotions in writing without revealing their darkest secrets. It is the journal that students must carry out of the classroom--a piece of their lives that began from the first moment they recorded how they felt about something, profound or profane. Most student cower at the thought of English because somewhere along the line too much grammar was forced on them--too much verbal castor oil, too much structure and limitation. Inevitably a student's freedom to explore him or herself, his or her desires, and his or her boundaries, leads to a newfound appreciation of English. Quotations from students themselves verify this assertion. Further, both Donald Murray and Peter Elbow stress journal writing as an important component of the writing process. They talk about the need of every writer to be able to write quickly and spontaneously. Journals are an ideal place for students to explore responsive, unstructured and free writing. (TB)

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A Conflicting View in the Use of Journals for Composition and Literature Classes: Structure Verses Freedom

I venture to say that some of the most powerful and profound thoughts known to humankind are the result of freedom, freedom to write whatever it is that our souls must purge; whatever we are thinking that troubles us; anything that hinders our ability to be in that particular moment of living. Need I state that our students are in this hindering flux? This flux is the one oxymoronic constant in their lives from the moment they enter our classrooms and long after they leave; a flux that keeps them moving in a maze of discovery, only they cannot find their way to the food that awaits them. And the ultimate irony is, their "food," is only a page away. We, the teachers of English, and all that this involves; grammar, writing, rhetoric, literature, and at times a combination of all of these things, are the matri de's of this writing restaurant. We must show them that writing comes from within. Eldridge Cleaver, the former Black Panther once wrote from the confines of his prision cell:

After I returned to prison, I took a long look

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> at myself, and for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray--astray not so much from the white man's law as from being human, civilized. . . Even though I had some insight into my own motivations, I did not feel justified. I lost my self respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered. That is I why I started to write. To save myself. (15)

Oh, that we might show students how to "save" themselves from themselves, or at least have a record thereof. Almost twenty years ago, when I too was a lowly freshman and my biggest crisis was finding a major, I was required to keep a journal of my experiences. I confess that if I were subjected to great torture and pain, I could not tell you the professor's name, unless I cheat and pour through the journal, but I can tell you what remains from this course so long ago: I write. Here, in front of me at this very moment is the journal that I began so long ago. For this course, and this much I do remember, we could write about anything. So, comparable to most of the students I have in my classes, I also began with a brief introduction about myself. But I won't bore you with those details. I did notice that my fifth entry addresses some level of discomfort about reading my journal outloud in class. This entry is dated August 29, 1978:

> Today in English class we had to read one of our selections from our journal. Doing so made me feel very uncomfortable. I just feel like anything that I put in here is not for others to read. I can handle the professor reading my material, but I think that in the future, I will 'pass' when it's my turn.

I laughed when I read this entry from so long ago because my fear, my sense of boundaries, is a topic of debate amongst those of us who require our students to keep journals. But before I launch into a diatribe about journal writing boundaries, this particular professor did not make us read our entries unless we wanted to. Again, my memory fails me. Did she ask this of us as a means of sharing the different ways a journal could be written? I do not know why she asked. I only know that her request made me uncomfortable. Given that there is no other mention of a request to read from our journals, I'll assume that it was a one-time request. I know that I would never ask a student to read from his/her journal. I can barely get them to read their freewrites outloud in class, much less something that they may have taken the time to reflect upon. But my discomfort is interesting. Now, this discomfort is relived and reversed. I ask the students to share their lives with me through writing.

On the first day of class, I tell them about the journals, and what I'd like to see. "Give me guts and

glory," I ask. And no sooner are these words out of my mouth then I tell them that there are ways of giving their writing emotion and feelings without telling me all of their deep, dark secrets. I also tell them that whatever they write about is between us, unless they tell me they have murdered their roommate. For that information, I might have to turn them in, but for simply hating that person, I won't. And I tell them the reasons why I think a journal is important.

I do not ask the students to keep a journal because of any pedagogical ideal, or because afterall, it is an English class and they should write their little hearts out. No. Journals are part of my belief system. With synergistic serendipity, through pen, paper, and mind, their world, their lives can unfold through their journals. This connection, their connections, is education in its purest form. An education is not a collage of facts and figures memorized for a bried period of time. It is what we will always carry with us, what we can assimilate and integrate in the world that has nothing to do with our parchment paper degrees.

It is the journal I want them to remember. It is the journal I want them to carry out my classroom door-a piece of their lives that began from the first moment they recorded how they felt about something, profound or profane. I think we would all agree that most students cower at the thought of English. Why I ask? Why are the majority of students repulsed about English? I think somewhere along the

way, too much grammar was literally shoved down their throats and it probably tasted comparable to a large dose of "verbal" castor oil. Those of us in the profession perpetuated their dislike of English. We failed to show them the multi-colored spectrum of English: how beautiful words are; the power of words because it evokes feelings and conjures images. I contend the journals ease the medicinal aspects of an English course. No more verbal castor oil! Give them the chance to vent, speculate, rant, rave, create, and more importantly, show them the power of our language is only a word away from their minds, to pen, to paper. This proposed metamorphosis begins if we keep the "structure" out of one aspect of their writing. Structured journals are too confining, too restrictive for these "feeble" writers. Let their journals be their discovery. Let them venture into the world of writing by blazing their own writing paths.

Perhaps journals should be called journeys, afterall, the root word, "journ" is a derivative of the French word, "daily," and not so surprising, "deity." Journals; deity? A pathway? No matter what religious preference we might subscribe, perhaps our gods, our souls, begin with writing about ourselves. And with this freedom enters the infamous "b" word, otherwise known as boundaries. Isn't this too part of an education? Aren't boundaries what we all struggle with in every aspect of our lives? Who defines what is acceptable? Better still, who knows what is acceptable? These questions are the things that students ponder over.

They are given a home away from home and liberties awarded no soldiers, and are asked to learn, to graduate. Here lies the real opportunity for growth, both personally and educationally. Let them explore the boundaries. Realistically, how many students will exploit their already well-ingrained sense of boundary? I venture to say that perhaps out of two hundred students I have taught this past year alone, only one crossed what I would call boundaries. My discomfort is a small price to pay for the results I've seen through exercising writing freedom with their journals.

Inevitably, the freedom to write whatever their hearts desire has given them a newfound appreciation for English. Let me quote a few of my students from a second semester composition and literature course:

> It helped me alot to talk about things in my life. When I could write about what I wanted, I enjoyed writing. Keeping a journal in this way lets you be free in your writing. You can create what you want and you will put more effort into it if you enjoy it. (Huneycutt)

> Every class has to be so formal, but just this once, I could go wild and crazy. (DeShong)

> The journal we kept was great. We could say what we wanted and there were no restrictions. Sometimes it was difficult to think up topics, but it gave me a sense of freedom. Journals are a way

of expression that is all your own. Writing journal entries also helped to develop my writing skills. (Head)

Sometimes I did have trouble trying to figure out what to write. But I'm glad we were able to write what we wanted. (Fullwood)

I enjoy writing journal entries on subjects most people won't even touch, or for that matter, won't even think about. What makes a good journal entry one may ask? Well, in my opinion, a good journal entry is one that you write, leave alone, and then read again and feel the same emotion with which you wrote that entry. If a subject were assigned, it may make a journal entry more difficult to write due to the fact that the subject assigned would not draw emotion out of each writer. As long as one may choose his/her own subject upon which to write, one will always express some emotion. (Zwemmer)

This last quotation is the crux of all that I am attempting to stress. This student discovered his own writing niche through his journal. He says that he "enjoy[s] writing entries that most people won't touch." I agree. In fact, his journal was one of the most creative journals I've ever read. He exercised his writing freedom. This freedom translated into his formal papers. He was not afraid to take

writing risks. His "voice" was strong. In fact, I would wager a bet that his voice is so strong that if all of the students typed their papers and did not include their names, I could tell you which one is his. His voice began with his journal. Additionally, this student's comments about "what makes a good journal is one that you write and leave alone, and then read it again," is Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow, incarnate.

Both of these writing shoguns stress process writing. Murray urges all writers in his book The Craft of Revision to write the first draft as quickly as possible, and then step away from their work. As most of us know, stepping away from our own writing, gives us a healthy dose of writing objectivity. Elbow contends some of these same things: "But if you let yourself write things wrong the first time-perhaps even the second or third time too-something wonderful happens . . . Trying to get it right the first time . . . often makes people timid-less willing even to try writing things" (Elbow 43). I'll take Elbow's observation further: the students don't have to get "anything right the first time," in their journals. And still further: Elbow writes that "the goal is to get power into words. If I'm right, that means getting your reader to breathe experience into what you write" (335). For me, "breathing experience in one's words" occurs when the student writes about his/her life. So do we ask them to use their journals as a place to record their experiences and then draw boundaries? That's

comparable to telling someone to breathe, but take only shallow breaths. I say, breathe and write deeply!

Toby Fulwiler contends: "Journal writing tells teachers more about what students know and don't know than more formal assignments designed specifically to find these things out" (149). Maybe some of us might feel uncomfortable reading certain things from a student's journal, as if we were their therapists, and not getting paid for it-at least what most therapists make. But, the issue is the freedom to open the valves and let what may come forth, come. Fulwiler addresses this issue of freedom verses structure when he writes:

> Most teachers feel that the learning in journals is too private to witness and too subjective to measure in any way. At least part of this assertion is true: Journals do imply subjectivity, privacy, and even intimacy; they also imply, for the writer, license to think, react, speculate, evaulate, and try things out-freely, without fear of penalty, censorship or negative commentary of any kind (160).

Obviously, there is a risk involved when we ask students to write about any thing they feel. In fact, I agree with Fulwiler's assertion that "journals [do] imply subjectivity, privacy and intimacy." But these are the ingredients of all relationships that we have with people in the world. Are we not preparing our students for the world? We are not just

mere teachers of English, hoping to save souls from the sins of comma splices and sentence fragments.

We are teachers. We take our jobs seriously and humbly. Often we take risks, risks that involve throwing conventions to the academic wind. If encouraging students to delve, feel, and play with language is part of this risk, then I say, let the words pour forth. Let them feel the power of their own words; and let us encourage them to do so. Is the chance we might have 1 student in 200 to disclose something so terrible, so horrific that we squelch all of the others' creative abilities? If you think it might be uncomfortable, then I suggest that you do not make journals part of your class requirements. Although I think balance is important, sometimes, things either are, or they are not. Yes or no. Night or day. Either permit total freedom with the journals or don't require it as part of the course. I leave you with a teaching paradox: we ask them to interpret literature and write about it. We ask them to delve beneath the surface. Think, ponder. But then we ask them to refrain from writing about the very things that make good literature?

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